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## GRIEG AS A NATIONAL COMPOSER.

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RECENT criticism of the music of Grieg, while generally appreciative of his technical skill and lenient to his peculiarities, nevertheless plainly declares him to have fallen short of being a great musician—that is, one who treats themes of universal interest and whose ideas expand into the breadth of a symphony. The prevalence of the “national” element in his music is referred to as an instance of his limited lyrical and subjective temperament, which has seized upon the narrow field of folk-song and dance as a convenient and natural vehicle for personal peculiarities. Such misconception may arise from the point of view from which foreigners and theorists regard the peculiarly intimate element in Grieg’s music. There is, perhaps, no great necessity for correcting it, since it must in course of time inevitably correct itself; but it is a curious sign of increasing scholasticism among critics, some of whom should know from personal experience what part the national element plays in the general development of all art, and not least in music. It may thus not be useless to attempt, for the benefit of the music-loving public, a more liberal, less dogmatic appreciation of the national element in Grieg’s music, and possibly also to dispel some of the false conceptions and imperfect explanations which are so often associated with the work of a composer, and are allowed to grow and become a tradition without question as to their genuineness or likelihood.

That Grieg should be thus criticised is nothing wonderful. No doubt, when a composer becomes popular his days are, musically speaking, numbered. And Grieg has become popular; more, however, by virtue of his idiosyncrasies, his mannerisms, than

by appreciation of the intrinsic value of his music. People play his pieces and gloat over them who do not understand their chief trait. This piano-playing age seizes upon anything that sounds enticing to the ear and brings out the qualities of the instrument; but what does this signify? Not by any means that the essence of the composition is always taken into account, assimilated or rendered. The outside features, the musical tricks, the phrasing, are the things grasped. By degrees, the peculiarities at first charming and even seductive become stale, and the hapless musician is reproached for possessing what was previously accounted his virtue. So it has happened to all the individual composers from Weber to Schumann—lately to Franz and Grieg; and so it will happen to all who are still the idols of the concert-room, Tschaiowsky, Dvořák and the rest. Nor is this their fault. They have all, each in turn, expressed in their individual way the conceptions prevailing in their time, and it is the fate of all things made by mortals that time, as it constantly moves on to the morrow, forgets what was of yesterday. Nor can it be made a matter of reproach that the artist has chosen for himself some small sphere of expression wherein he moves supreme. Not the rendering of the macrocosm, in its constantly increasing vastness and manifoldness, can be the aim of his art, but only the microcosm, the world within himself, his circle, his nation. To be rendered at all, the universe must still be moderate in size and limited in its comprehensiveness, as it was in Beethoven's days, a world full of human force which broke itself against the bars of destiny; or it must be the universe reduced to its metaphysical entity, as it exists in Brahms' learned and philosophical work.

The variety of methods of human expression in which the microcosm can be rendered has given rise to such rather artificial standards of judging a composition as whether it is universal or personal, objective or subjective, epic or lyric, or even didactic or divertive in tone. Letting these criteria stand for what they may, what is it that, irrespective of skill of workmanship, ease or learning, makes the lasting quality of a musical work and establishes the final judgment of its value? Is it not the predominance in it either of thought or of feeling—the exquisitely melodious quality, spontaneous, direct, lucid; or the weighty, discursive, sometimes even argumentative, utterance which by degrees builds up the final issue and presses the idea home? Be-

tween these two poles—exclusiveness of thought on the one hand and expansiveness of emotion on the other; mountain-heights of pure vision and sheltered glades of sweet repose; the speculative quality, "*die verstandesthätigkeit*," and the compassion charged with memory but remote from pain—all music of aspiration wavers: sometimes touching the one, sometimes both, sometimes remaining between. Although some would characterize the one as the more universal and objective, the other as the more individual and subjective expression, is it really worth while or even possible to say which is the best and the highest? Music, as the fluctuating expression of man's moods, can hardly be restricted to any formula or domain of utterance. This would be to deprive it of its greatest virtue, that of being responsive and sympathetic to all phases of life, to all shades of sentiment. In the end, does not our choice depend upon our individual disposition, and does not all music really begin, in its expression as well as in its appreciation, with the individual? If the artist pictures the elusive thing we call life, with its thousand mirages, or the majestic mountain-top, where the cool blue visions tell of immovable heights even more sublime, who shall say which is the more perfect?

It has been asserted, somewhat dogmatically, that Grieg's music has none of the objective value of the impersonal expression which characterizes the highest art, and that he is singularly individual, at most only national. But in their use of the word "national," his critics seem too narrow. Why always look upon the national as identical with the local? The national is not merely an expansion of the personal, it is likewise a step toward the universal; thus it unites both the objective and the subjective, the epic and the lyric. This distinction, however, often indulged in, between the individual and the universal, seems a mere play with words, sometimes only a question of change of opinion. No doubt, Mozart and Schubert, and Beethoven most of all, appeared distressingly subjective to their contemporaries; yet to us, whom by their individual rendering they have helped to reach a higher level of comprehension, they are universal. Such music as Scarlatti's and Bach's, because of its singleness of feeling, might be characterized as universal in the primitive sense of the word; and yet, although these men employed generally the same means and methods, they are not only

in name but in individuality separate, in a sense that characterizes one as German, the other as Italian. All composers of note have either expressed some degree of national reaction against foreign influence, or have sought in their work to interpret some phase of the national temperament to the nation itself. Thus even Brahms, in spite of his cool heights of thought which might stamp him as universal to a peculiar degree, has found his chief glory in expressing not only national exaltation in the hour of grief and memory, but also the peculiar spiritual problems with which the superior minds of his nation wrestle to-day—the eternal riddle of a true and worthy life, the single-minded devotion to a noble idea, the sacrifice of success in order to tend the light of superior knowledge; problems which, as Brahms presents them, are more thoroughly German than they are or could be English, French, or American.

Whatever, then, the individual critic may consider the essential meaning of universal or national, it seems necessary to admit that the importance of a composer must, first of all, rest on the message he brings to his people. His natural relation is to them rather than to humanity at large, and his music becomes universal only through voicing their aspirations and character. His message to the world can have genuine force and vitality only as it is filtered through his message to his nation. In Europe nationality has for too long a time been a latent and potent force not to exert influence even over an art which, like music, may claim to have cosmopolitan tendencies.

We think that critics in their estimation of Grieg's music have often allowed themselves to be unduly influenced by his personal appearance, and measuring the one by the other have found both wanting in such strength as the normally developed is presumed to possess. That psychological reasoning which bases an estimate of mental worth on physical singularities, in which the French have of late shown themselves especially proficient, is too easy and too cheap a trick to deserve much comment. To give the accidental the force of an axiom has always been looked upon as both unphilosophical and unscientific. The utter tactlessness of the remarks showered upon Grieg—that he is a dwarf, that one shoulder is higher than the other, etc., as if this had anything to do with his efficiency as a musician!—inevitably lowers the tone of the criticism containing them.

One critic, in speaking of Grieg's use of national music, calls such music a dialect rather than a language. The remark may, indeed, apply to the original random tunes and lays. But the artistic treatment of these national melodies, the elaboration of primitive harmonies and the use of them as *motifs* on which to build a structure of learned musical composition take away their original crudeness and abruptness without destroying their characteristics, and add these forgotten and secluded tunes to the great family of melodies with which the whole world may become familiar. Under such treatment, their limited exclusiveness exists no more, and a new chapter is added to the volume of human expression. Hence if a national composer becomes popular in a cosmopolitan sense, as Grieg has, this is due not merely to idiosyncrasies, but also to the good and legitimate reason that the message he brings is understood and appreciated by nations not akin to his.

Grieg's position toward his country is peculiar. Of course, other composers all over the world have made national music theirs, worked it over, drawn inspiration from it, feasted on its freshness of feeling, and embodied it in their works. Indeed, the national element concealed in modern music is much larger than people would at first be inclined to believe. Nay, upon examination the national element will show itself influential even in cases where the composer alone is credited with the invention of his melodies. But, however successful in their application of the national, none, from Weber to Tschaikowsky, has been so completely in sympathy with its nature, so obedient to its character, its form and color, as has Grieg. Many see in this a distinct limitation of his genius. Grieg ought to have done as his brethren did, they think. He should have treated the national material as a makeshift, as an interpolation or ornament. But this has not been natural to him to do, and the result seems to justify his attitude. What the possession of a national music such as his means to a people, the value of its stimulating and unifying power, Americans, who do not as yet possess any, cannot quite understand. It is the same with the man who does not know what fatherhood is until he himself has a child. While the music which claims to be universal expresses often the merest generalities, is vague, indefinite and theoretical—"attenuated cosmopolitanism," as Carlyle puts it—national music is strong, di-

rect, alive in every fibre. It is of enormous educational influence to the people, bringing the ideas all have in common home to their mind and heart, with the strength of what is home-grown and truly lived.

Of all the Norwegian composers of national music, none has touched, as Grieg has, the spring of the idiomatically national. The mountain fairy of whom Norwegian folk-lore tells, the mysterious spirit of the voices of the forest and the silence of the glens, the golden-haired and blue-eyed maiden, Muse of the peasants and inspirer of their lays, she who appears in the solitude and plays the "*langelek*" and "*lur*," of whom the poets have sung eloquently but abstractly,—she revealed herself at last in all her eerie power, when Grieg took these "boorish" tunes and lent them a voice that could reach farther than the faint vibration and whispering of her fantastic cithern. Thus Norwegian peasant-music has reached a development which it could not otherwise get, has become what it now is—bizarre, often morbid, sometimes boisterously gay, full of wild grace, taunting and jeering, yet plaintive and brooding; always singular, forceful and brilliant. Norwegians did not realize what possibilities were in them or their songs until Grieg put his hand to the elaboration of these tunes.

When I here apply the word "national" to the Norwegian peasant-music as it originally existed, I ought perhaps to do so with a certain reservation. It may be that there is no such thing as strictly national music; nothing in its beginning is quite home-grown, everything is somehow transmitted from elsewhere and then assimilated. In fact, several of the Norwegian folk-tunes, for instance, in their beautiful sensitiveness suggest strongly both Haydn and Bach, or even remoter sources. In the same way, the Swedish "*polska*" in its vivacity, mocking charm and martial clamor forcibly reminds one of Slavic folk-tunes. But whatever was the musical germ of these songs and dances, they have been so thoroughly recast according to the popular temperament that to-day they are Norwegian; and by Grieg's working of them into the mould of more universal tendencies, they are also in the broadest sense national.

Nor is it only the national in its ethnological meaning, but also the background of national feeling, of patriotism, the historical past recorded in song and tale which have been voiced by

Grieg as they have never been voiced before and perhaps never will be again. It is necessary only to remember Sonata, Opus 7, with the meditative, almost religious, Andante, the majestic Menuetto and the fiery Finale, which maintains its proud bearing to the end and closes with strains of highest enthusiasm and assurance. When one compares the Menuetto with compositions of romantic and patriotic tenor, such as Chopin's Polonaise No. 7, Opus 53, one meets with the same reference to a heroic past. In Chopin's Polonaise, we have history brilliant and exhilarated by blares of trumpets, by beauty and valor, by the glamor of a great gathering, by the tramp of horses and the flash of swords, until, by a subtle change of mood, it all sinks into dust and the night-wind moans gently over forgotten graves. Grieg's Menuetto suggests no sense of bereavement, but a continuous and proud presence of the fairest and noblest of the land, crowned with strength and beauty—a throng of knights and dames, lords and ladies, the throne in the background, and the standards of many battles and adventures waving in the summer-breeze, while the torches glow and the music, now majestic, urging to deed, now gentle, persuading to pleasure, puts the crowd in motion responsive to its rhythm. If to this we add Grieg's music to Björnson's poems and dramas, which are epic if anything, his compositions for choruses and orchestra in which he has lent the poetic words a wonderful, soul-speaking power, his witty rendering of portions of "Peer Gynt" and his "Holberg Suite," we find he has expressed for his nation its greatest good of all: the feeling of its historical integrity and its oneness with the land that bore it. Such beautiful patriotism, never maudlin or chauvinistic, frank, earnestly devoted with a son's devotion, will suggest that he sank his own individuality in the larger unit, rather than that he made the national subservient to himself.

It is, perhaps, not altogether wrong to say that the bane of Grieg's highest work has been his settling for good in his villa by Bergen and secluding himself from the vigorous life elsewhere. Certainly, if one knows the temperamental likeness between himself and Mozart, whose ethereal and unworldly height of beauty and feeling he renders as no one else does, and his strong musical leanings toward Schumann, it is clear that not all he has had to say is embodied in the national. He has wished to express other things, which with unimpaired health, a different



environment, and greater means, he might perhaps triumphantly have said. Possibly, as has been declared, Grieg has not developed into the most powerful expression, into grappling with cosmic problems and solving them in symphonies. Yet the time-honored custom of considering a composer of but middling worth until he has foisted his aspiration to immortality upon the world in the shape of a symphony, is about as fallacious as the eighteenth-century theory that whoever had not written an opera was really no musician of note. It reminds one of the English literary notion that a poet who has not written a drama, however lame dramatically, is no great poet. Grieg has struck the pole of feeling rather than the pole of thought. And within the sphere of national feeling, at least, he has surely combined the opposite elements, voicing the epic and objective as well as the lyric and subjective. In fact, the two are in him so curiously blended that, contrary to current opinion, through Grieg's music it is the nation which speaks its innermost thoughts as much as Grieg himself. We agree that he has been more of an artist in his production than a philosopher. Hence, according to the demands of some æsthetic rigorists, he has failed to reach the very highest rank. But a composer is not made up according to a pattern, a universal pattern; he is made according to something which it is in his nature to become. Grieg with his opportunities and endowment appears to have made the most of both, to have expressed what he found most worth expressing with such surpassing beauty and oneness of feeling that the nation for which he did this owes his work an infinite debt of affection and esteem.

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